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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly introduces the reader to the notions of learner training and learner autonomy. It makes practical suggestions as to how training might be woven into the typical short summer language program, in the hope that it might improve the students' effectiveness during and after the course. It is argued that this can be done in three ways: by giving explicit instructions to the learners; by allowing the learners to follow their ideas through in the classroom, by providing opportunities outside the classroom. Training is appropriate in most any situation, because it gives the learner the tools to learn the language more effectively. These same tools can be used effectively by the autonomous learner. Autonomy is quite possible without training, and training by itself does not entail autonomy. Learner training in certain area can broaden the horizons of the learners and may empower them to become autonomous in some or all aspects of language learning. In becoming actively involved in the process of learning, students may set their own objectives, and by working independently of the teacher both inside and outside the classroom and in selecting and using the strategies best suited to the occasion, they may realize a sense of autonomy, and this process will have been worthwhile. (Contains 8 references.) (KFT)

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Applied Linguistics Series

Learner Training for Learner Autonomy on Summer Language Courses

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I read, and I forgot.

I saw, and I believed.

I did, and I understood. -Confucius

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McCarthy

Introduction

In this paper I intend to briefly introduce the reader to the notions of *Learner Training* and *Learner Autonomy*, and to consider the relationship between the two. Further, I hope to make some practical suggestions as to how training might be woven into a typical short-stay summer language programme, in the hope that it might improve the effectiveness of the students' learning while on that course, and perhaps more importantly, their continued learning after that course. This, I will argue, can be done in three simple ways - first, by giving explicit instruction to the learner, second, by allowing the learner to follow his or her ideas through in class, and, third, by providing the learner with opportunities outside the classroom, by way of the social programme, extracurricular activities, or anything else that the learner may feel is appropriate. Training is appropriate in most any situation because it gives the learner the tools to learn the language more effectively, those same tools that are, or at least can be, used by the autonomous learner. Of course, autonomy is quite possible without training, and training certainly does not entail autonomy - they exist in a relationship which is unsteady, yet fruitful when dynamic.

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (Little 1991:4). Even in this simple definition it is clear that "autonomy" is not any one specific thing - it is a capacity, and like any other capacity, it will grow with practice, or be lost through inactivity. Mc Garry (1995: 1) notes that "The majority of students are still being taught in ways which promote dependence and leave them ill-equipped to apply their school-learnt knowledge and skills to the world beyond the classroom", and from this we may recognise that the role of the teacher in promoting autonomy may be central to its success. It is not true, however, to say that the non-

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autonomous classroom is devoid of any relationship with the outside world: on the contrary, it is a place where skills and capacities may be developed and tried out, before, and during, contact with the world beyond. McGarry concisely sums up, then, the essential arguments for autonomy:
"Students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programmes of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess their own work and, generally, to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future". (Ibid.)

This is also true in the case of EFL students visiting an English speaking country, as, in a sense, autonomy is thrust upon them. In choosing to come to a country and undergo an intensive language programme, the learners are committing themselves to the ultimate authentic experience. Not only will they study English in class, they will learn English by virtue of the fact that they will be forced to communicate through it on a daily basis - necessity being the mother of invention, the skills and capacities of the successful learner will be fostered by the communicative necessities of daily life. Those that choose to ignore this opportunity, preferring, rather, to speak their mother tongue to their compatriots, rarely reap the greatest benefits of the experience. This is hardly surprising, as after all, autonomy in language learning is defined as success in language learning.

Learner Training

It has been said that teaching is nothing more than showing someone that something is possible, and learning is merely discovering that something is possible. The objective of learner training is to improve the effectiveness of learning, and effective learning is part and parcel of autonomy. Training should be a course in learning how to learn, as Trim (1988: 3) quite rightly reminds us that:
"No school, or even university, can provide its pupils with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult lives. It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself or herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned how to think and how to learn".

Indeed, studies, such as Naiman *et al.'s*(1978) "The Good Language Learner", note that even the best of language learners varies significantly in the strategies he or she uses; even if all those studied were capable of using the same strategies, their personal preferences in language learning would still create differing emphases. Another interesting, though not surprising, finding of "The Good Language Learner" was that effective learners were actively engaged in the learning process. Dickinson (1992: 1) comments:
"Effective learners are capable of identifying the learning objective currently being pursued by the teacher. They know what to learn and how to formulate their own learning objectives [...] and they restructure the teacher's objectives to suit their own changing needs. They are able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies, monitor

their use of strategies and change them if necessary, and monitor the effectiveness of their learning. This is what is meant by engaging actively in the learning process: these are the kind of decisions effective learners take about their own learning".

This, of course is characteristic of the autonomous learner. It is also a description of some of the strategies that students can be trained to master.

The Course

In this next part of the paper I intend to describe some of the concrete proposals that can be easily implemented in the language school where I work. First, though, I feel the reader should have a basic idea of how the school operates.

As is required by the regulations, class numbers are kept to a maximum of 15, though as a rule, they rarely rise above 12. Teaching hours on the normal course are from 9.15 a.m. until 1.00 p.m. and are split into four periods roughly equating to the four skills. There is a strong emphasis on functional use of language during these hours. In addition to this, clients are strongly encouraged to attend study tutorials at least once a week; teachers are available during these hours to help the clients in any way possible. These study hours are usually taken in the school library, though clients are permitted to adjourn to a classroom if they require to work in groups for any reason. A modest self-access centre is also available, allowing students access to audio, video and computer materials, as well as a language laboratory - these are available from 8.30 a.m. until classes begin, and again after school hours until 6 p.m.

Clients enrolled in the intensive courses take an additional class after lunch two days per week, in ESP, translation, literature or some other area of interest. While not compulsory for anyone, a most popular activity among those enrolled in the school are the workshops, which are available each weekday in debating, art, drama, music and creative writing, amongst others things. The emphasis here is on having fun and relaxing while doing something meaningful through English.

The social programme includes excursions in the Dublin area on week days, and optionally to places like the Aran Islands or the Ring of Kerry at weekends. A large well-equipped sports hall, and tennis courts are also available each afternoon, as well as a number of football pitches. Each evening, a café is open in the school and the families hosting the students are encouraged to come along and socialise with the students. Discos and theme parties are also organised on Friday nights.

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction in various areas can be most beneficial to the students; a sense of learner autonomy as a capacity, as Little (1991: 4), above, suggested is a good starting point. I would propose one, or maybe, two sessions, as part of the afternoon workshops, in making the learners aware of the language acquisition process, and the ways of

improving, facilitating and speeding it up. It is uncontroversial to assert that learners need this sort of meta-knowledge, and meta-language is, of course, a necessary part of understanding this explicit process, but in itself it has no pedagogical merit - it is merely a means of allowing students to understand what is going on - it is the first step on the road to critical reflection. Needs analysis is the first concrete step to be taken, for it is only in setting realistic goals, that the learner may move forward with confidence. Many courses are available in learning how to learn, and each has its own good and bad points - the most important thing that anything of this nature must accomplish is to instil a sense of reflection into the learning process; see Willing (1989) for some useful ideas.

Concrete practical training in dictionary use and the phonetic alphabet also serves an important purpose - to empower the student. The term dictionary is not intended to signify a pocket bilingual dictionary, but a substantial learners' dictionary, such as the Collins COBUILD Dictionary of English. They give the learner a sense that they can find out anything that they might want to, in the absence of someone to consult; this is just one type of independence.

The use of authentic materials is perhaps the most important target of this explicit learner training. The self-access materials available in the school, are modest in nature, and are easily equalled when the student returns home. Magazines such as *Time*, or *Newsweek*, are available all over the world; *Bord Fáilte*, *The British Tourist Authority* and many other organisations are willing to send out information packs to foreigners at no cost; even when back in their native countries, the students will be able to find no end of authentic materials if they know where to look - schools, universities, libraries and so on. The internet, and more particularly the World Wide Web, is predominantly English based and is increasingly multimedia based.

Authentic texts, and authentic experiences, are by far the richest source of language. Mc Garry (1995: 3) notes that authentic texts "can play a key role in enhancing positive attitudes to learning, in promoting a wide range of skills, and in enabling students to work independently of the teacher. [...] That this is so becomes apparent when we examine the contribution authentic texts can make in two areas of major concern: a) the matching of language learning opportunities to the needs and interests of individual students, and b) the creation of the conditions under which students can most successfully exploit the opportunities." Once the students have understood this, they are empowered to search out authentic materials and situations in which they may learn effectively. Being in the target language country, they are presented with the ultimate opportunity to rise to this challenge of independence.

Explicit training in strategies is also important; it is hoped that the students might learn some specific strategies from these sessions, such as writing away to one of the authorities mentioned above, in order to use their language productively, and then receive concrete feedback; but, in the absence of this, the most important thing is that they become aware of strategies in general, so that they will be able to select, implement and monitor their

own use of strategies in the future - to engage actively in the learning process. Gail & Sinclair (1989) and Willing (1989) both provide excellent exercises for explicitly teasing these strategies from students, and provide further ideas on how to concretise them and thus, allow students to build on them.

Following Through

If the ideas and measures taught, and teased out, in the explicit sessions are not followed through in class, it is unlikely that the learners would have faith in any new methods they might choose to follow. It is here most particularly that the teacher's role is critical in allowing the students room to experiment. For example in choosing a particular task, the teacher may allow the students to perform it with reference to a piece of authentic material, of the students own choosing.

Another suggestion is project work. I envision this taking place in one of two ways. Either the students may be permitted to work in groups of their own choosing, on topics of interest to them. Or, perhaps a more comprehensive, but more restricted plan of action is suitable. If a weekly "topic" is chosen for the programme, on Irish Writers, for example, the teachers and students are free to choose materials of interest to the members of the class, and to concentrate on them, just as they would on any other materials they use. The consistency of the theme provides reinforcement of the functions and notions involved, while allowing the students to work independently of the teacher.

After Hours

Of course, learning does not stop at the door of the school, and some would argue that perhaps it only really starts there. Practical project work on suitable areas provides the perfect excuse for the learners to go out, and use their language. Continuing with the topic of Irish writers, the students could be encouraged to do some research into where further information can be found. Apart from libraries, places such as the Irish Writers Museum, or the James Joyce Tower in Sandycove, are mines of information on this area. Those students who can be encouraged to visit one of these places, will discover the benefits of learning in context. In this way hopefully, they might understand the purpose and effectiveness of the complete learning experience that training is intended to enhance.

Conclusion

By a simply implemented course of action, such as the one outlined above, it is hoped that the effectiveness of students' learning may be enhanced. Learner training in certain explicit areas can broaden the horisons of the learner and may empower him or her to become autonomous in some or all aspects of language learning.

In becoming actively involved in the process of learning the student may set his or her own objectives and by working independently of the teacher both inside and ouside the classroom, and in selecting and using the strategies best suited to the occasion, he or she

may realise a sense of autonomy, and this process will have been worthwhile.

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